



Adolescent Health Research Updates

Supplement to the Adolescent Health Plan

No 1 — December 1996

This is the first of many Research Updates that will be published periodically by the Alaska Adolescent Health Advisory Committee (AHAC). AHAC believes that effective planning for the health of Alaska's adolescents should have a strong scientific basis. Alaska's Adolescents: A Plan for the Future, the 1994 publication by AHAC, was the product of the committee's review of research related to adolescent health at that time. In order to stay current with new information, AHAC continually reviews research dealing with a broad range of adolescent health topics. Summary reports are prepared by AHAC members for distribution to people interested in teen health, especially those who use Alaska's Adolescents as a guide for their efforts in the field. Feedback about the usefulness of these updates is welcomed.

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The Media and Adolescent Health

Television's Impact on Certain Teen Behaviors

On average, children and teens spend 22 hours each week watching TV. This approaches the average amount of time spent in school: 33 hours per week.¹ What do children get from this medium, and how does it affect their behavioral choices? This report is a review of what research has shown to be the relationship between the media (mainly television) and certain adolescent behaviors.

Research shows a cause-effect relationship regarding violence:

- **Media violence causes youth to behave more violently.**^{1,2,3}
- **Media violence causes youth to become less sensitive to violence.**^{2,3}

The impact of television on other behaviors is less clear: a causal relationship has not been proven, but research shows a strong correlation. For example, pregnant teens see TV relationships as more real than do non-pregnant teens.⁴

Some studies simply describe and analyze the content of media, leaving us to draw conclusions about its impact on the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of kids. For example, 80% of MTV videos contain stories involving sexual imagery and violence against women.³

The following paragraphs summarize these and other findings. Most of the information is from publications by the American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Communications,^{2,3} and one of its members, Victor Strasburger, M.D.³ Both the AAP and Dr. Strasburger conducted extensive reviews of the research literature for their reports.

Television and Violence

Children watch an average of 20,000-200,000 violent acts on TV by the time they finish high school.^{1,3} The U.S. shows more TV and movie violence than anywhere in the world, and the amount is increasing. Guns are a frequent source of violence in all media.¹

Media violence has a causal effect on aggressive behavior.^{1,2,3} There are more than 1,000 studies dealing with the effect of watching TV violence on subsequent behavior. The evidence is so convincing that researchers have stopped viewing this relationship as merely correlational.³

Research indicates that media violence contributes to 5-15% of the violence in real life.³ Strasburger found the settings in which TV acts as a causal agent for aggression and antisocial behavior include:

- rewarding or failing to punish the aggressor
- portrayal of the violence as being justified
- depiction of violence without consequences
- aggression against females by males engaged in sexual conquest⁵

One study suggests that half of all homicides are correlated with long term exposure to TV violence.³ Another group of studies link media violence with burglary, theft and criminal violence.³ Several longitudinal studies have established the relationship between watching TV violence in early grade school and aggressive behavior in later years.⁶ The researcher's conclusion was that "for boys in all countries and for girls in the U.S., TV violence was associated with more aggressive behavior and was cumulative over time."⁷

Numerous studies have shown a strong link between TV portrayals of suicide and news reports and rates of subsequent suicide attempts and completions.³ Identification with the suicide victim by the susceptible teenager may be a significant factor in attempting suicide.

Other links between the media and violence among youth include:

- **Media causes desensitization to violence.**^{2,3} There is much evidence showing greater insensitivity to actual violence following the viewing of violence on TV.³
- **Videos, MTV, arcade games, and music targeting children and adolescents carry violent messages about the nature of our society.** A survey of the most popular video games found 40 out of 47 games to be violent. Video game research has shown correlations between video game violence and subsequent aggression in kids.³
- **Children who are heavy TV viewers see the world as more dangerous and violence as more acceptable.**³ Although this is a correlation rather than causation, it reflects an unhealthy view of society.
- **Video games, music videos and MTV have aggression toward women as one of the dominant themes.**⁴ Causal effects on behavior have not yet been established.³

Television and Sex

Not enough research has been conducted to determine if a causal relationship exists between viewing sex on TV and sexual experimentation. While it is known that TV contributes to cultural norms, the precise influence on teen sex has not been measured. Facts about the quantity and quality of sexual displays in the media are relevant, however.

- **Afternoon and evening network programs carry 65,000 sexual references per year.** A recent survey of 19 primetime TV programs most watched by teens found an average of 3 sexual references per hour, mostly kissing and unmarried intercourse. The display of sexual behavior on primetime television doubled between 1975-1988.³
- **Rarely does TV show the adverse consequences of having sex, i.e., pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease.**^{3,4} Only 150 out of 14,000 sexual references seen by kids each year mention any responsibility or contraception.³ Ninety-four percent of the sex on soap operas is between unmarried people; soap opera sex occurs 24 times more often between unmarried than married partners^{3,4}.

- **Eighty percent of MTV videos contain stories involving sexual imagery and violence against women.**³
- **Movies on cable television and video cassettes have increased youth access to sexually explicit materials.** A Michigan study found the most frequently watched movies by high school students were R-rated.⁸ ("R" rated content is deemed inappropriate for people under 17, unless they are accompanied by an adult.)
- **TV portrays teenage girls in negative stereotypes.**⁴ Television often shows young women as weak and in subordinate or victim roles in relation to men. In addition, women are often portrayed in jobs that are inferior or less professional than men.⁴ Studies show that TV stereotypes are learned by kids and that these stereotypes are demeaning to women.³

Despite the high rates of teen pregnancy, STD's and the skewed images of sexual activity on television programming, the major networks have adopted the position that advertising of contraceptives would be unacceptable to viewers.⁸

Television and Alcohol & Tobacco

While products that reduce pregnancy and STD's are forbidden in most media forums, products known to cause disease and death to thousands of people annually—cigarettes and alcohol—are abundant in the media. The alcohol and tobacco industries spend billions of dollars annually on the basis that advertising works. Strasburger³ reviewed the extensive research, and among the findings:

- **Children and teenagers are exposed to 1,000 -2,000 beer and wine commercials annually.** Less than 2% of alcohol content ads contain messages about personal responsibility. A 1989 study identified 25-50 alcohol commercials for every Partnership for a Drug Free America ad. Another study found children were able to identify more brands of beer than American presidents.
- **Tobacco products are the most heavily advertised consumer product in the United States, despite the ban of tobacco advertising on TV in 1971.** Tobacco companies spend \$4 billion a year on advertising. Pre-school children in one study

found the Joe Camel character was as well-known as Mickey Mouse.

Movies and television programming contain numerous alcohol and cigarette messages. Victor Strasburger in his research review of the affects of media on adolescent behavior found:

- **100% of the made-for-TV movies in 1986 contained drinking behavior or references to it.** Since 1984 references to alcohol have decreased from 10 per hour to 6 per hour in 1991.
- **Movies show cigarette smoking frequency three times that of the actual average use.** TV programming has shown a steady decrease of smoking by its characters since 1952. While only 2% of TV series stars smoke, very few are shown in situations expressing antismoking sentiments.

Many studies show correlations between viewing these products and using them. Studies reviewed by Strasburger³ show:

- **Cigarette advertising appears to increase a teenager's risk of smoking** by affecting their image of smokers and smoking is the conclusion from studies by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- **The cigarettes most popular among teenagers smokers are the brands most heavily advertised.**

Other Health Effects of Television

TV watching is correlated with being overweight.^{2,9} The hours spent watching TV replace hours of other childhood activities. Only three percent of the 10,000 TV food commercials seen by kids each year, advertise food that is truly healthy. Studies have found a correlation between children viewing "junk food" ads and an increase in requests for those same foods.¹ While some research has shown a causal relationship between TV watching and obesity,³ other researchers disagree with this conclusion.¹⁰

TV watching is correlated with a reduction in creative imagination. A review of the research on this subject supports the thesis that TV increases daydreaming and decreases creative imagination.¹¹ Causal associations have not been established.

Advertising effectively teaches children to recognize, like and want products, regardless of any real benefit that may be derived from them, according to the National Science Foundation.³ An average of 360,000 TV commercials will be seen by the time a teen graduates from high school.³ TV advertising is a multibillion dollar industry. Young children do not know the difference between TV programming and advertising.^{1,3}

Summary

The popular media and its effect on children and youth is a controversial topic in our society. Opinions about TV's benefit or harm to youth tend to be based more on a personal belief and value system than on thorough research. This may be in part because **determining** that TV causes a specific change in behavior or health status in a population is very difficult to do. It may also be due in part to the huge economic factors that drive TV programming.

This report is a summary of what well-conducted research concludes about television's effect on certain health-related behaviors. It does not look at all types of media, nor at all the ways in which a young person could be affected by media. It does, hopefully, offer clear evidence of the real and potential harm kids can suffer as television viewers.

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